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Possible gang presence a concern in Montville

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Montville — The six young men accused of brutally beating a local teen-ager in the woods behind the Mohegan Fire Department last fall may merely be a group of friends who were driving around town that night looking for something to do.

But the victim of their aggression and his family suspect there could be something more to their relationships.

Throughout town, residents are talking about Down For Life, a gang that has a presence in some of the state's larger, more crime-ridden cities, but is becoming commonly known around here.

“There's sometimes a real distinction between a small group that forms in a town and a major gang in a city. Sometimes kids get together and just call themselves X or Y,” said David Erwin, the superintendent of schools. “I've heard little bits and pieces about (the gang). It's nothing that's spilled into the schools, but I won't say I haven't heard scintillas.”

Whether the six young men charged last month with the beating of 16-year-old Michael Fernald on Oct. 3 are members of a gang, or even claim to be, is uncertain. But Fernald remembers each of them that night wearing a white bandana with a black logo signifying their membership in DFL, or Down For Life.

According to state law enforcement officials, gang activity in Connecticut's larger cities, particularly Hartford, has been on the rise in the last year as gang members who were arrested in the mid-1990s finish their prison terms and are released.

“We put many of the gang members away, and now they're getting out,” said Major Frank Griffin, commanding officer of the state police Criminal Investigation Unit, of which the Gang Unit is a part.

In the early to mid-1990s, as gang activity peaked, police launched an aggressive anti-gang campaign, arresting hundreds of members on a variety of charges ranging from narcotics possession to assault in an attempt to break up the gangs' grip on urban areas.

During incarceration, gang affiliation is often cemented despite corrections officials' efforts to segregate known gang members. And when members reach the end of their terms, their gang bonds are as strong as ever, officials say.

“We're addressing problems in Hartford, Bridgeport, New Haven, New Britain,” said Griffin, explaining that gang activity in southeastern Connecticut has been basically dormant in recent years. “These last couple of years, the (Gang) Unit has laid low because gang members have all been in prison.”

Now, Griffin said, the state police will start focusing again on gang activity in larger cities, where gangs

are most active. It is in the cities, experts say, where gang activity starts.

Griffin said he had no knowledge of gang presence in Montville.

“There's a lot of spillover,” said Bridgeport school counselor and gang expert Lisa Taylor-Austin, explaining that New York gangs come to Connecticut cities to recruit members, who in turn spread out into suburban areas to recruit more members.

Taylor-Austin, who said she is aware of Down For Life activity in Bridgeport, also said that sometimes families will relocate from urban to suburban areas hoping for a higher quality of life, and their children will often “bring their gang” with them. “Gang-involved” children or teens in military families are often major catalysts for gang activity, Taylor-Austin said, because they move often and rarely establish deep roots in a community.

Also common, she said, are “hybrid gangs,” groups of kids who merely emulate what they see in rap videos and urban-culture movies.

“In smaller towns,” Griffin, said, “three, four, five guys might call themselves a gang, but they're not a big deal. They're not the Latin Kings. ... There are a lot of wannabes out there.”

On the night of the beating, Fernald had been riding his bicycle near the Mohegan fire station on Route 32 when the group of six approached him in two cars. Seeing the cars coming, Fernald hid in the woods, but the young men found him.

According to arrest warrants, they demanded money from Fernald, and when he told them he didn't have any, they began hitting, kicking and stomping on him. One of the young men then threw Fernald's bike on top of him, and the group left.

According to one group member, they then walked back to their cars, where they laughed about the attack and gave each other “props,” or hugs, the warrant states.

Fernald was able to walk home through the woods after the attack, but was severely injured. He spent four days in The William W. Backus Hospital and is still in therapy, working to completely regain his memory.

Jared J. Pennell, 18; David J. Donatello, 17; Robert Villano, 20; Christopher R. Belardo, 19, and Brian W. Gamble, all of Montville; and David J. Kovalik, 18, of Norwich, were each charged with first-degree assault, first-degree robbery and second-degree larceny. Robert Dempsey, 19, of Montville, who had been riding his bicycle with Fernald that night, was charged with hindering prosecution and making false statements.

Dempsey, police said, is Donatello's ex-stepbrother and misled police during interviews, possibly to protect Donatello.

“It was kind of a shock to us,” said Ann Fernald, Michael Fernald's mother. “We had no idea there were gangs in this town until Michael told us.”

“I would think Norwich might have gangs, or New London, but not Montville,” she added. “We've always felt safe here.”

“That's how a lot of parents feel,” Fernald continued, referring to the shock and concern many parents have about the potential of a gang presence in town. “We can't let our guard down now, even here.

“That's the sad part.”

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